DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 254 521 SP 025 969

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TITLE Improving the Conditions and Quality of Teaching: State Policy Issues and Options. An Issues Analysis Paper.
INSTITUTION Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific.
PUB DATE Jun 84
NOTE 13p.; A discussion draft.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *Educational Policy; *Policy Formation; *State Departments of Education; State School District Relationship; State Standards; Teacher Employment Benefits; *Teacher Improvement

ABSTRACT

State Education Agencies (SEAs), in their pivotal role of representing the interests of both the public and the education establishment, must make constant reassessment of the directions which may be taken to improve education, and of the policy issues and options to be examined. These policy-level considerations can be brought into focus by reviewing the contexts in which the improvement of teaching must take place. SEA education policies concerning the improvement of teaching need to be at once sensitive to, and isolated from, political considerations. Other contextual factors in education reform are contradicatory trends, e.g., demands to make things tougher for students and simultaneously to have more concern for their individual needs. Established law and entrenched interests in education must be of concern in policy formation as well as the complex problems inherent in reasonable and sufficient state funding. SEA action for improvement of education must be concerned with what is crucial to real educational reform, what is amenable to change, and most clearly with what is in the area of state-level authority. Factors to be considered are: (1) political realities; (2) organizational and institutional power balances and alignments; (3) patterns of school organization; (4) current and projected fiscal resources; and (5) state level priorities. (JD)

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ED254521

IMPROVING THE CONDITIONS AND QUALITY OF TEACHING: STATE POLICY ISSUES AND OPTIONS

An Issues Analysis Paper

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

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June 1984

SP025969

INTRODUCTION

All of the recent major "reports" calling for the reform of American education give high priority to the improvement of the status, conditions, quality and effectiveness of teaching. Not all of the specific reform proposals directly relate to teaching--almost everything that could conceivably be changed about the schools has been suggested as an appropriate arena for educational reform--but in nearly every case, teaching is a key problem identified and a key solution proposed.

For example, if academic standards are to be raised, graduation requirements sharply increased, intellectual rigor restored, and the school's focus on the basics--however defined--be kept clear, higher quality teaching is essential. If there is to be increased emphasis on mathematics, science and foreign languages, more and better prepared teachers in these fields will be needed. If we are to move our schools and our students quickly and smoothly into the new technological society, teachers must be prepared to be the leaders of this movement. If we are to get more funds for education from the voters and the legislatures, and closer cooperation and support from business and industry, the schools must be able to demonstrate that the quality and effectiveness of teaching have really been improved.

Making schooling more effective through more effective teaching is an undoubtedly valid approach to educational reform, but an early and urgent note of caution needs to be sounded: it would be unfair to make teachers the scapegoat for all of the shortcomings of American education. Improving teaching and the educational enterprise in general is clearly a complex process and a two-way street. A perplexed and often critical general public is coming to see that the conditions of teaching must be

upgraded before we can expect the quality to show any remarkable improvement. A harried teaching profession--but one legitimately entitled to be proud and confident--is realizing that changes will have to be made within the profession in order to secure and legitimize public confidence and support.

State education agencies, in their pivotal role of representing the interests of both the public and the education establishment, have been in the forefront of the move to revitalize teaching as part of the more comprehensive education reform movement. This leadership position requires the SEA to make a constant reassessment of the directions which may be taken, the education policy issues and options to be examined. These policy level considerations can perhaps be brought into focus by reviewing (1) the contexts in which the improvement of teaching must take place; (2) the range of reforms which have been or are being proposed; and (3) some of the specific policy issues which confront SEAs.

I. CHANGE WITHIN CONTEXTS

Improving the conditions and quality of teaching has to take place within a number of complex contexts which may assist, define or circumscribe what the SEA itself may accomplish--and the SEA, in turn, is only one of the actors involved in the whole change process. Describing here briefly a few of these contextual factors is not meant to take the SEA off the hook--to indicate that somebody else is primarily responsible or that nothing can be done. Rather, by making a realistic appraisal of some of the forces and factors which are affecting the move to improve teaching, clear and feasible educational policy options become more readily available for consideration.

Political expediency. Some cynic has recently suggested that it is neither the rising tide of mediocrity nor the rising tide of reports which threaten to inundate the schools, but the rising tide of political expediency! A great deal of the proposed education reform which focuses on teaching seems to be driven as much by political as by educational considerations. If one looks at the sponsorship and the popularization of the move toward teacher competency testing in the 30 to 40 states where it is now a talk/action item or is actually in place (and about the same number of states are currently considering differentiated teacher pay proposals), the political genesis and implications are clear. Being on the bandwagon is good politics--and there's nothing inherently wrong with that. It is the political system in America that is supposed to identify, legitimize and authorize desirable social change.

But the excessive politicization of an educational change invites real trouble. Off-the-cuff analyses and quick-fix solutions are endemic (and clearly evident) in purely political responses to educational problems. Often, there is a pandering to the public appetite for punitive action: an anti-labor sentiment wanting public action to "get" the teachers union, or an anti-youth sentiment wanting the schools to "crack down" on the kids. Already, in some places the political quick-fix attitude has caused the high expectations of educators for real educational reform to degenerate into fear, even paranoia; and the initial enthusiastic political interest, even intrusiveness, subsides into political apathy when enabling legislation and--especially--appropriations are needed.

Thus it would appear that SEA education policies concering the improvement of teaching need to be at once sensitive to and decently isolated from political considerations.

Contradictory trends. One of the significant deterrents to clear educational policy formulation is that what at first appears to be a trend to be addressed is often canceled out or at least contradicted by an opposite trend. For example, the schools are faced with the simultaneous and contradictory requirements imposed by (a) declining enrollments and reduced fiscal support and (b) public expectations and even demands for expanded programs to meet perceived social and economic needs and for imposition of academic requirements which are inherently expensive. It is difficult to retain present staffing and compensation patterns, much less improve them, under these demanding conditions.

As another example of concurrent trends pulling in opposite directions, there are at once moves to diminish and to increase the supply of teachers. Reform plans call for restricting admission to teacher preparation programs, making certification harder to obtain, and getting rid of marginal or worse teachers by competency examination or by other means, yet there are also plans to increase the supply of teachers, both in spot shortage areas (science, mathematics, foreign languages, high-tech areas) and at the elementary level where the new miniboom in enrollment will next be felt.

Current job market demands, therefore, will result--are even now resulting--in simultaneous RIFs and new hires, creating a notably unstable employment pattern, at best a nervous situation in which to try to have new and demanding initiatives for improving teaching readily or enthusiastically accepted by the rank and file of the teaching profession.

Other contradictions among disparate and competing goals and aspirations for American education--contradictions now exacerbated by the strength and stridency of the reform movement--call in essence for the school to make things tougher for students and simultaneously to have more concern for their individual needs. The resulting dilemma is not calculated to make any easier the design and implementation of improvements in teaching when even good teachers can't be sure what is expected of them.

Established law and entrenched interests. Only brief mention need be made here of the familiar problems which accompany any effort to make substantive change in the training, employment and compensation of teachers. Collective bargaining laws and negotiated contracts are the not-so-hidden rocks upon which many a worthy proposal will founder. Tenure and dismissal laws, embedded in statute and buttressed by a long chain of court decisions, are very difficult to alter. Teacher education institutions and teacher certification authorities yield slowly to change--not, one must say in fairness, always just out of ingrained habit or self-interest (although indolence and selfishness do play a part), but because they are simply not sure the changes proposed are really for the better. (And if changes are made which would seem clearly to be in the interests of better teaching, can the effect be really noticeable until many years have elapsed--until every existing status, condition and right which had to be grandfathered/mothered in has run its course?)

Funding. The last of the contexts within which educational improvement must be considered might well--considering its importance--have been placed first on the list. The bright prospects for constructive change dim most rapidly when immediate and potential costs

are considered. There is a general reluctance on the part of boards and legislatures to "talk real money," as one superintendent recently put it. With some very notable exceptions in a few of the states, funding has been a severe stumbling block to change. In those exceptional cases where adequate funding has been forthcoming, the promised trade-offs have to be politically and ideologically sufficient--more money supplied for teachers' salaries, for example, in return for their accepting merit pay and tough competency exams. Some increased funding, of course, is likely just because of the current general enthusiasm for educational reform, but it seems realistic to expect that unless the funding authorities can see quick and dramatic improvements, funding enthusiasm may not last--and perhaps, equally realistically, it shouldn't!

II. SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENT OPTIONS

The multiplicity of "reports" (as the many reform proposal documents have come to be generically called) contain so many specific suggestions for improving education by improving teaching that it would be impossible even to list, much less to discuss, them all. Therefore, our concern here will be with those

- most crucial to real educational reform;
- most amenable to change within existing contexts;
- most clearly in areas of state level (SEA) concern.

Any attempt at a classification of possible directions to go in improving the status and effectiveness of teaching can be properly suspect as an oversimplification, but some perspective may be gained by dividing the proposals into two categories: improving <u>quality</u> and increasing <u>compensation</u>.

Suggesting quality and compensation as the major issues highlights the most vexing question raised by the improvement of teaching proposals--the Catch-22, chicken/egg problem: which comes first? It's not possible to attract and retain a highly competent teaching force without vastly improved compensation, but the public will not provide the fiscal support needed until convinced that the actual teaching performance is worth the money requested.

Recognizing that there is not a once-and-for-all solution to this dilemma, we may nevertheless find it helpful to look at some representative lists of significant and interrelated policy options which can be considered, and possibly supported and encouraged by SEAs.

A. Options in Support of Improved QUALITY

- Devise and support practices which would attract a fair share of the most able students in teacher preparation programs (active recruitment; slimmed down requirements; scholarships, bonuses, promise of higher pay).
- Drastically revise preservice teacher education programs (more demanding admissions requirements; more academic subject matter; much practitioner input; primarily post-baccalaureate).
- Tie certification and recertification standards and requirements to differentiated teaching assignments, not to the accumulation of years of experience and hours of credit.
- To attract candidates in "shortage" fields, allow initial certification with little or no teacher education coursework.
- Use "competency" tests for initial screening, certification and/or continuation of employment and salary increases.
- Vastly increase money and effort devoted to staff development, with sharp targeting on training needs discovered through supervisory observation and assessment of student progress.
- Organize schools for quality enhancement (better use of time; more teacher autonomy but more collaborative effort among teachers; incorporation of many "effective schooling" features).

B. Options in Support of Increased COMPENSATION

- o Attempt to tie any proposed changes in compensation to the encouragement, recognition and reward of quality.
- o Substantially raise base pay schedules across the board.
- o Provide for longer contract year as an option.
- o Make available special bonuses for various purposes: for recognizing "outstanding" teachers; for attracting candidates to "shortage" fields; as incentives for teaching under especially demanding conditions; etc.
- o Abandon concept of "single salary schedule," to be replaced by some form, adaptation or variant of differentiated salary bases: merit pay, differentiated staffing, career ladder or whatever.
- o Use "output" measures to determine teacher compensation.
- o Place increased emphasis on nonmonetary compensations: better working conditions; more autonomy; planned public recognition; the psychic rewards of working in an "effective schooling" environment (as standards and achievement rise, so does job satisfaction).

III. SEA POLICY OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Even a brief list of alternative--but not mutually exclusive--ways a state might go in improving the quality of teaching and increasing the compensation of teachers implies numerous detailed policy options. A point-by-point analysis of each option would contribute little to overall policy development. For example, a mere listing of the variants (with pro and con arguments) of various differentiated pay programs would become bogged down in details and quite possibly would not clarify the real policy issues. Likewise, with the matter of competency testing: questions could be raised about almost every program feature. Who should mandate the testing, or should it be mandated at all? Whould the tests be used for admission? for certification? for recertification? for

promotion? for special pay? Should the skills or knowledge tested be basic? professional? academic subject matter? Should standardized or state customized tests be used?

The volume and complexity of such detailed treatment aside, the real problem of point-by-point analysis of each of the issues which might be raised lies in the question of specific applicability.

Variants of each of the proposals are highly specific as applied within a given state--the state context will largely determine the acceptability of the proposed change. Consideration of such factors as these becomes inevitable:

- o political realities;
- o organizational and institutional power balances and alignments;
- o patterns of school organization;
- o current and projected fiscal resources;
- o state-level priorities.

All of these, and more, will help determine educational policy which can serve as an effective and responsible response to the stirring popular call for educational reform.

In addition to the analysis of state specific <u>acceptability</u> considerations, policy judgments regarding the educational <u>suitability</u> of proposed changes are necessary. There seems to be developing among SEAs a fairly firm consensus that there are some policy guidelines which are especially applicable to the demand for improving the condition and quality of teaching. A few of the most significant may be suggested here.

1. <u>The necessity of directly relating any proposed changes to quality performance and quality education</u>. There is little value in having a satisfied, well-paid, publicly appreciated cadre of teachers

unless these desired conditions result in better teaching and better learning. And these results must be as visible as possible, capable of being assessed and evaluated. Even prospectively, before the changes are made or any opportunity for the assessment of their effects is possible, the proposed reforms can be judged in terms of their likelihood of resulting in those factors which are indicative of effective schooling--clearer goals, higher standards and expectations, better use of time, more effective instructional practices, and--above all--higher levels of student achievement.

2. The significance of policy interrelationships. The highly visible and politically appealing changes in the status of teaching (competency testing and differentiated pay plans, to name the two most prominent examples) attract a great deal of attention, but they may well distract attention from other important changes that need to be made--in teacher education or in school organization or in supervisory practices, as examples. All of the areas of potential improvement need attention because they are inextricably interrelated.

3. The dangers of unintended consequences. Policy makers have always known that individual policies have consequences that are unintended and, indeed, very hard to trace. (You start out doing one thing, and something else happens!) Are typical teacher competency tests putting excessive emphasis on bare bones factual knowledge? Are these tests resulting in an unacceptable level of exclusion of minorities from teaching positions? Are the evaluation requirements essential for effective master teacher and career ladder programs possible to meet without extensive and expensive training and time for effective

supervision? Will using "output" measures of teaching effectiveness (such as student achievement gains) have a chilling effect on a creative curriculum and imaginative teaching?

The tortuous interrelationships among the various elements in a program to improve the conditions and quality of teaching give clear indication that the whole problem must be viewed at once, even though the solution can be achieved only in incremental steps.

4. Policy sustains momentum. There is increasing concern that the initial vigor of the reform movement in education is losing momentum. The complexities of the problem of improving educational quality, the intransigencies of various affected groups, and the sheer monetary cost of the reform proposals may make the problems seem insurmountable. It is at this stage that educational policy may play its most important role. For if policy represents a forthright statement of direction of movement toward clearly articulated goals, as it should, it serves to clarify the problems and to suggest solutions. If the direction that SEAs have set amid all the morass of proposals for improving the conditions and quality of teaching is clearly to improve the quality of education and to advance the pursuit of excellence, then the step-by-step details have at least a fair chance of being worked out. A clear-cut policy direction offers the best chance there is of sustaining the reform momentum.